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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RPO DUBAI 000007

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SUBJECT: IRAN CLERICAL ORGANIZATION 'DEMOTES' OPPOSITIONIST SENIOR CLERIC

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On January 2 the Qom Seminary Teachers Association announced that 72-year old Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sanei, one of the main senior reformist clerics supporting the Green Path Opposition (GPO), "did not meet the necessary criteria" to be considered a 'Source of Emulation' (i.e. a religious authority for Shia Muslims). Moderate and oppositionist clerics weighed in against this statement, pointing out that (inter alia) this clerical organization had no authority to pronounce on such an issue, which is normally determined by elite consensus among senior clergy and Muslim believers. Expediency Council President Hashemi Rafsanjani also (indirectly) opposed the pronouncement, as did (and far more significantly) the office of Grand Ayatollah Sistani. While domestic Iranian reactions to this statement divided largely along the predictable and largely political fault lines, Grand Ayatollah Sistani is widely seen as the pre-eminent Shia Source of Emulation, and to have him weigh in against this JAM statement is a serious loss of face for Supreme Leader Khamenei. As many oppositionist websites have argued, this Qom Seminary Teachers Association statement, borne of a political desire to put pressure on and weaken Grand Ayatollah Sanei, will in all likelihood only burnish his oppositionist credentials and magnify his importance. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) BACKGROUND: The Qom Seminary Teachers Association ('Jame Modaresin Hoze Elmie Qom' - 'JAM') is Iran's major clerical organization. Founded in 1961 and composed of approximately 50 senior clerics, it is quite conservative, with strong ties to the government. Its current head is hard-line senior cleric and former Judiciary head Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi. END BACKGROUND.

DEMOTED

¶3. (U) On January 2 JAM announced that 72-year old Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sanei (whom it referred to only as 'Hajj Sheikh Yusef Sanei'), one of the main senior reformist clerics supporting the Green Path Opposition (GPO), "did not meet the necessary criteria" to be considered a 'Source of Emulation.' (NOTE: In Shia Islam believers are encouraged to follow and seek guidance from a 'Source of Emulation,' aka 'Marja-e Taqlid,' -sufficiently knowledgeable and pious enough to interpret Islamic law and practice). JAM issued this statement responding to what it cited as a question from 'numerous scholars and professors' in the Qom Theological Seminary who had asked for its opinion on Sanei's religious

authority ('marjaiat'), "given the repeated questions of our fellow countrymen."

¶4. (U) MORE BACKGROUND: Although the letter seeking a JAM ruling said that JAM "has always been the source for determining the issue of clerical legitimacy," this is far from the case. Determining whether a senior cleric was a 'Source of Emulation' in Iran has traditionally been an informal and non-government-related issue, based mostly on consensus among the clerical elite.

¶5. (U) MORE BACKGROUND (CONT): After the 1994 death of Ayatollah Araki, JAM published a list of seven senior clergy whom it considered as having the necessary authority and competency to be a Source of Emulation. Neither Grand Ayatollah Sanei nor Montazeri were on this list, although Ayatollah Khamenei was. However, this January second announcement is the first time that JAM has directly said that Sanei lacks the necessary conditions to be a Source of Emulation [See Appendix for JAM's current list of 'authorized' Sources of Emulation]. END OF BACKGROUND.

REACTION-PRO

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¶6. (U) This JAM announcement as to Sanei's lack of qualifications to be a Source of Emulation was quickly disseminated by pro-government media. Additionally, on the afternoon of January second, a group of seminary students and teachers gathered at Faizieh Seminary in Qom, brandishing pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei and chanting 'Thank you, thank you, Qom Seminary Teachers Association,' in support of the JAM announcement. At this meeting JAM member and pro-government hard-line conservative cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami told press that a special JAM commission had spent 'over a year' investigating this question, studying Sanei's record and rulings, and that the issue had been settled one month ago. He said that JAM had made a decision first at a December 31 meeting with all members present, than at a second meeting "with nearly unanimous support." Subsequently another JAM cleric, Hojjatolislam Mahmoud Rajabi, told Iranian press that some of Sanei's rulings 'clearly contravened passages from the Qoran,' and that methodologically speaking he did not practice traditional Islamic jurisprudence ('Feqh-e Javaheri'). He also said some of his rulings were heresy, and that he had been warned but hadn't paid attention.

REACTION: CON

¶7. (U) Outside of government circles, there was widespread opposition to the idea that JAM could determine Sanei's religious competency. As expatriate oppositionist Hassan Shariatmadari (son of the late Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari) pointed out to BBC Persia [paraphrase follows]:

- the necessary qualifications for being a Source of Emulation are: reaching the level of 'Ejtehad' in one's religious studies (i.e. capable of exercising independent reasoning in interpreting Islamic law); having students; and having the necessary financial resources, normally derived from followers, to promote one's scholarship. JAM cannot reasonably make this claim, since it is obvious Sanei had received permission from those who had taught him to practice 'ejtehad' (i.e. independent judgment).

SANEI SAYS:

¶18. (U) According to oppositionist websites, Ayatollah Sanei's office responded that it would not react for the moment, "due to ambiguities concerning the agreement of most of the members of this organization with the statement." It added that it would wait for publication of the names of those JAM members present at the meetings referred to in the letter, and also for clarification as to the credentials of those who ruled on this issue.

¶19. (U) Articles on the oppositionist website 'Rah-e Sabz,' affiliated with dissident cleric Mohsen Kadivar, claimed that JAM's actions were of a piece with other government efforts to silence Sanei, to include removing his writings from circulation, and having its 'thugs' attacking his offices in Tehran and Mashhad. These articles praised Sanei's 'new thinking' on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, his advocacy of women's rights, and his opposition to the government's post-election crackdown. They also asserted that 'no one' thinks one can bestow or remove religious authority with a directive or a bulletin: it is based on affirmation by one's peers and teachers. '

MORE SANEI SUPPORT

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¶10. (U) On January 3 the reformist 'Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers' ('Majma-e Modaressin va Mohaqeqqin-e Howzeh-e 'Elmieh-e Qom' - smaller in size and influence than JAM) issued a statement decrying the JAM announcement, saying that a Source of Emulation "isn't a government position where a person, group or organization has a right to hire and fire." It pointed out that Sanei has years of teaching religious topics and has written a religious treatise [NOTE: writing one is a prerequisite for becoming a Source of Emulation]. It also noted that Ayatollah Khomeini had appointed him to two separate positions due to his religious qualifications, and that Sanei himself has certified the religious credentials of currently serving Iranian officials. On January 4 the reformist 'Assembly of Militant Clerics' (aka 'Ruhaniyun-e Mobarez') also issued a statement supporting Sanei, saying that there was 'no doubt about Sanei's religious credentials,' and that his followers didn't accept him due to one group's statement, and wouldn't spurn him because of another group's statement.'

RAF WEIGHS IN

¶11. (U) On January 4 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, seeking to preserve his support among traditional clergy, also voiced his (indirect) support for Sanei's religious credentials. In response to question from a student group, he said that Sources of Emulation were never 'hired or fired' by anyone, but that people selected their own Sources of Emulation by using their own discernment, and by paying their religious dues to these individuals.

¶12. (U) Reactions of some other prominent Iranian clergy were a function of their political views, with pro-government senior clergy (Grand Ayatollahs Nasser Makarem-Shirazi and Grand Ayatollah Hosein Nuri-Hamadani) refraining from commenting, while moderates such as former Judiciary head Ayatollah Mousavi-Ardebili expressing support for Sanei. Former Esfahan Friday Prayer Leader and GPO supporter Ayatollah Jalal Al-Din Taheri Esfahani issued a statement saying that the JAM announcement was 'illegitimate.'

SISTANI: NO

¶13. (U) Surprisingly, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who normally doesn't comment on Iranian matters, also took a position on this issue. According to oppositionist press on January 4 his office issued a statement saying that JAM "was not an authority for determining Sources of Emulation." It added that although the individual believer's opinion is what is determinative in this case it deemed Grand Ayatollah Sistani to be the pre-eminent Source of Emulation, followed by Grand Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani.

¶14. (C) One US-based Iranian analyst with strong roots in Iran's clerical community told IRPO that this JAM statement came about because Supreme Leader Khamenei was concerned about Sanei's potential to replace Grand Ayatollah Montazeri as a senior cleric oppositionist leader, and therefore sought to isolate and put pressure on him through different tools, including this statement. This analyst said 'Khamenei is suffering from a deep paranoia...and is arresting everyone of influence' in the hopes that more of a crackdown will help him to manage the crisis. However, he thought this JAM statement was "a big mistake by Khamenei," since the

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response of Sistani and other senior clerics was "quite devastating for Khamenei" and "would discredit JAM even more than before."

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The independence of Iran's clerical class began to suffer almost immediately after the Revolution, when Khomeini 'demoted' Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari. At that time Shariatmadari was the senior-most Source of Emulation in Qom and the one who (ironically enough) first 'recognized' Khomeini as a Grand Ayatollah in 1963, thus preventing his execution by the Shah's government. Qom's subordination to Tehran increased significantly after (then) Hojjatolislam Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989. Today, Iran's clerical class is almost fully under government control, and this latest JAM statement reflects not just Khamenei's ham-fisted attempts to suppress all opposition but also the almost complete disappearance of Iranian clerical independence. Grand Ayatollahs Sanei and the late Montazeri were rare exceptions, and it is more often the case that prominent clerics who disagree with the government on many matters (such as Vahid-Khorasani) choose to remain largely silent on political issues.

¶16. (C) COMMENT (CONT): Having said that it does indeed seem, as our IRPO contact argues above, that this JAM statement was an over-reach which backfired. While domestic Iranian reactions to this statement divided largely along the predictable and largely

political fault lines, Grand Ayatollah Sistani is widely seen as the pre-eminent Shia Source of Emulation, and to have him weigh in support of Sanei is a serious loss of face for Supreme Leader Khamenei. As many oppositionist websites have argued, this JAM statement will in all likelihood only burnish Sanei's oppositionist credentials and magnify his importance. END COMMENT.

APPENDIX:

JAM LIST OF SIX PERMITTED "SOURCES OF EMULATION"

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- [1](#)1. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei
 - [2](#)2. Grand Ayatollah Hossein Vahid Khorasani
 - [3](#)3. Grand Ayatollah Mousa Shobeiri Zanjani
 - [4](#)4. Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem-Shirazi
 - [5](#)5. Grand Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani
 - [6](#)6. Grand Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Sistani
- EYRE